

Living the good life

For a lot of Canadians, there's something nostalgic about Florida – whether because of winter road trips or a first encounter with Mickey Mouse. Our writer recounts her childhood memories there and looks back on how the destination has evolved. BY OLIVIA STREN

Almost every year when I was growing up in Toronto, I used to visit my grandmother at her condo in Palm Beach, Florida. Sometime around the first frost – when my friends at school (the ones with ski-lift tickets adhered to their winter jackets) started talking excitedly about things like slaloming and double-black diamonds – I would start fantasizing about flying to Florida like a retiree. The condo was – aptly, it turns out – dubbed La Bonne Vie. Like so much Floridian architecture, it was a red-tile-topped Spanish Colonial Revival-style building painted a conch-shell pink. Atlantic breezes visiting arched, well-pillared pathways, and I can still smell the hallways: a mixture of Hawaiian Tropic, chlorine and salt-air.

My grandmother, a snowbird, would winter at La Bonne Vie, and I'd usually visit with my parents and my sister around Christmastime or at spring break. Even when I was little, I loved to go to relax (Lord knows what I was relaxing from; I was 10), and the goal was to tan and shop at outdoor malls. So, for a week every year, I enjoyed *la bonne vie*. As soon as our rental car – usually some boat-like vehicle – would sail into the condo's coiling, hibiscus-hemmed driveway, and I'd see the condo sign (La Bonne Vie written in comforting cursive) perched amongst the leggy palms, I'd feel a rush of anticipatory, giddy delight.

In my family, tanning was sport. (This was the '80s before tanning invited a kind of sunshaming). So, I'm sorry to say, that most of my time was spent collecting sun damage. (There was nothing more thrilling than returning to school post-vacation with a deep suntan.) I remember the four of us reclining on a lineup of loungers passing the Hawaiian Tropic 4 like some kind of familial baton. And when we weren't sunbathing, we'd go grocery

shopping at Publix. The supermarket's tagline was (is) Where Shopping is a Pleasure, and shopping at Publix was deep pleasure. I'm not sure if it was because I felt so relaxed or because the cereal aisle was longer than the Nile, but Publix was, in itself, a republic of pleasure. My favourite outpost was the Publix in Palm Beach – it was painted a bunny-ear pink, and tycoons wintering on Billionaire's Row would wander the aisles in their monogrammed velvet slippers packing their shopping carts with crab salad as their chauffeurs waited in purring Bentleys outside. I also loved it because, in order to get there, we drove past Billionaire's Row, a stretch of South Ocean Boulevard – bordered, on one side, by a sun-sequined waters, and on the other, by colossal Italian Renaissance mansions, where fountains spouted from manicured lawns and hedges were kept as stiff and vertically inclined as my grandmother's hairdo.

The only thing more thrilling than grocery shopping was shopping at the mall. Florida is, of course, known for its malls; the Shops at Bal Harbour, in the designer Miami suburb celebrating its 70th birthday this year, was the world's first real outdoor mall. When retail visionary and developer Stanley Whitman, who is now 98 years old, divined the Shops at Bal Harbour over 50 years ago, he hired a professor at the University of Miami to research wind patterns to ensure the 16-acre outdoor mall be toured with tropical cross breezes.

Shopping for clothes became real pleasure, too. The first time I remember going shopping and choosing something for myself was in Palm Beach. I was nine-years-old, and my dad took me to my favourite store, Benetton (again, it was the '80s), on Palm Beach's Worth Avenue – a street appropriately at the foot of Billionaire's Row, fringed with Bentleys as big as the superyachts that bobbed in the ocean

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beyond. I spotted a cotton cable knit sweater and fell irretrievably in love. It was emerald green and I still remember the blonde sales girl who seemed so grown-up to me (she was probably 16) appraising my choice, assuring me that it was an excellent one and that the colour was “delicious.” I had never heard a colour described this way, and I loved it. My dad bought me the sweater and I wore it long after it fit. (My first part-time job, in high-school, was working at a Benetton in Toronto. I can still fold the hell out of a cardigan.)

Occasionally, we'd go out for dinner with my grandmother – her favourite spot was Charlie's Crab, a seafood restaurant just a platinum card's throw from Worth Avenue. She booked a dinner so early, so competitive with the lunch we'd just eaten, that just calling it “dinner” was farce. But we'd get home early enough to catch an episode of *Golden Girls*, which was (like the *Girls*) in its prime. In one of my all-time favourite episodes, Dorothy and Rose compose and sing a jingle about Miami: “Miami, Miami, you've got style. Blue sky, sunshine, white sand by the mile/When you live in this town, each day is sublime/The coldest of winters are warm and divine./Miami, Miami, you've got style. Blue sky, sunshine, white sand by the mile.” Even at 11 (the new 65?), living in south Florida seemed sublime.

My grandmother passed away 15 years ago, and I haven't stayed at La Bonne Vie since. And Florida is no longer exclusively the malls-and-lanais-and-early-bird-dinners it once was. It's flowered into a more dynamic, fashionable capital with its own brand of retro glamour. Florida design, too, is not Dorothy Zbornak-approved about floral and rattan; New York design darling Jonathan Adler, for example, lives in Palm Beach, connecting with the place's sunny, happy, palm-dressed chic. And the Florida food scene has evolved, and is not about crab-eating at 4:30 p.m. or Publix take-away or cheesecake-nibbling on lanais. South Florida is now enjoying its moment in the sun (where it belongs!) and is gluttonous with organic wineries, craft breweries and new restaurants serving up everything from Andean street food to wine fashioned from hibiscus. *La bonne vie*, indeed. ●

Photography: Visit Florida